

A League of Their Own: American Indian Basketball before Integration

By Tim Brayboy*

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Spectators filled the gym at Pembroke High School in Robeson County on Saturday evening, February 25, 1967. They watched with excitement as Harry Canady's three-point play lifted Magnolia High to a 56–53 overtime win over Les Maxwell High for the Tri-County Indian Athletic Conference boys' basketball championship. Fans did not know that they were watching the end of the conference and end of an era.

The next year, Les Maxwell, in Cumberland County, and another conference high school, Hawkeye, in Hoke County, became elementary schools. Their students were reassigned to other high schools in their districts. Four conference schools—Fairgrove, Magnolia, Pembroke, and Prospect—accepted invitations to join the North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA). A long period of segregation for these American Indian high school athletes had ended.

For decades, North Carolinians had lived mostly separate public lives based on whether they were white, black, or American Indian. Many activities and places such as schools, restaurants, and theaters were strictly segregated, or divided based on people's race. In the 1950s and 1960s, federal courts took action to force the desegregation of public schools across the country. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in its famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case of Topeka, Kansas, that segregation based solely on race denied the equal protection guaranteed under the Constitution. Where the state undertakes to provide education, the court said, it must make it available to all persons on an equal basis.

Robeson County is located in southeastern North Carolina and shares a border with South Carolina. Even before its official formation in 1787, the county was home to a very mixed population of natives, as well as people of Scottish, English, French, and African backgrounds. Today, American Indians make up about 38 percent of Robeson County's population, compared to 36 percent white and 24 percent black residents. For a long time, American Indians in the area—known by various names over the years, including Lumbees—were not welcome in high schools designed for white children or in schools built for African Americans. Eventually, separate schools were established for these native Robesonians.

In sports, white high schools did not play black high schools, and neither played the Indian schools. The NCHSAA offered championship programs for white teams, and another organization worked with black teams. From the 1920s through 1968, the small Indian

Athletic Conference provided sports competition for American Indian schools in Robeson and nearby counties. Top athletes usually could only wonder how things would turn out if everyone played together. "We were in our own little realm, in our own little area," said Danford Dial Jr., who competed in the conference from 1962 through 1966 as a Prospect High student. His father, Danford Dial Sr., coached at Pembroke and Prospect in the 1950s and 1960s. "To me, it made it more special. Bragging rights for being tournament champions, it meant quite a bit. There was a rivalry between Pembroke and Prospect you could not believe."

The Indian Athletic Conference held competition in football, basketball, and baseball for boys, and basketball for girls. Basketball drew the widest support from the community. Enthusiasm increased in 1939. That's when the Normal School (established in 1887 as Croatan Normal School for Indians, now the University of North Carolina at Pembroke) opened a modern gym on its campus in Pembroke. This was the first indoor athletic facility for American Indian citizens of Robeson County. It hosted many big games. Some of the area's best high school players later competed for the college. By the late 1950s, a few went on to play for other colleges.

Original Indian Athletic Conference schools were located in the towns and communities of Fairmont, Green Grove, Magnolia, Pembroke, Piney Grove, Prospect, and Union Chapel. After consolidation, which was an effort to combine smaller schools, the conference dropped to four members by 1952. A gym opened at each remaining school: Fairgrove, Magnolia, Pembroke, and Prospect. In 1966 the conference briefly expanded to six schools, adding Hawkeye and Les Maxwell to become the Tri-County Indian Athletic Conference.

Before the high school gyms opened, teams often played games at outdoor, dirt basketball courts. Players dressed in the clothes and shoes that they had worn to school. Competing indoors brought economic hardship to the schools, athletes, and families. Schools had to purchase uniforms, and parents had to buy gym shoes for their children. Sometimes families could not afford shoes. Despite such challenges, players were determined to compete. "When we played the conference tournament at the college gym, players were required to play in gym shoes," said Marvin Lowry, of Prospect High. "They would check citizens in the community to borrow gym shoes. I did not find a pair that fit. I had a pair of rubber overshoes (galoshes) I wore during the tournament."

In the 1930s and 1940s, social and economic life for Indian citizens (and many rural Tar Heels) was limited. There was no television. Few families had electricity. Some had battery-operated radios, and a few had money to go to a movie. High school sports provided the best entertainment in many places. Sports events offered a welcomed break from hard work in tobacco and cotton fields. The three-night Indian Athletic Conference basketball tournament for boys and girls became one of the year's social highlights. Each school drew a lot of community support at this time. A gym that would seat 1,000 spectators overflowed.

Dial fears that as time passes, the history of the Indian Athletic Conference may be lost. He sees a need for it to be preserved. "There were many people past and present who made a

lot of sacrifices to get us where we are now," he said. "They all need to be remembered. If it had not been for the leaders in all different schools and communities, I don't know how we would have survived. It opened the doors for those that are playing at the next level."

The remaining players and fans are old now, but a few of the old Indian gyms still dot Robeson County. The buildings offer a visible reminder of the days when American Indians in the southern part of North Carolina were outcast from high school athletics in the state.

Noting a Few of the Top Players

From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, many male and female athletes at Pembroke State College came from Robeson County's American Indian high schools. Segregation practices and enrollment regulations at other colleges and universities did not allow people of different races to attend. Students playing in the Indian Athletic Conference faced limited opportunities for future play, no matter their skills. One former player said, "The caliber of play was high quality. Given the opportunity, many of the players could have played anywhere. They were just that good."

Here are some notable individuals from the conference. Perhaps you can learn more!

Brothers Ned and Kent Sampson of Pembroke High School and Pembroke State College. Many people consider Ned the best basketball player from the Indian high schools. In the 1950s, Dick Groat, an all-American basketball player at Duke University, took a group of his teammates on a postseason barnstorming trip to Pembroke State.

Ned and a local group of Indian players competed against Groat's group. Sampson showed Groat a variety of shots that he had seldom faced. "He is the best I've seen," Groat said later in a newspaper article. Ned, a 6'2" forward, averaged 24.3 points in 1952. He tallied 40 points in a game against Campbell College in the 1951 season. Later a high school coach, he is a member of the UNC–Pembroke Sports Hall of Fame.

Ned's younger brother, Kent Sampson, at 6'7", averaged over 20 points per game in his four years of high school play. In 1966 he scored 51 points in a prep game. He received interest letters from colleges including Virginia Tech, N.C. State, The Citadel, and Illinois. He preferred to stay close to home and had a stellar career at Pembroke State.

Horace Hunt was an all-conference basketball and baseball player at Fairgrove High School. He played varsity basketball and baseball at Pembroke State, excelling in baseball. His coach called Hunt the best outfielder he ever had.

Forace Oxendine Sr. graduated from Union Chapel High School. He was an outstanding basketball and baseball player. Oxendine played both sports at Pembroke State. In baseball, he struck out 21 batters in one nine-inning game. He played professional baseball, advancing to the Triple-A level. Oxendine is a member of the UNC–Pembroke Sports Hall of Fame.

Rose Oxendine Hill, a cousin of Forace, was one of the most outstanding girls' basketball competitors. Playing the forward position at Pembroke High, when rules required six-on-six play for girls, she averaged 21 points per game throughout her high school career. In 1957 Oxendine scored 54 points in a regular-season game. She scored 53 in her final high school contest.

**Tim Brayboy, of Cary, grew up in Pembroke, Robeson County, and played basketball for Pembroke High School. After a long career as a public school teacher, coach, and administrator, he retired in 1995 from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Brayboy and Bruce Barton coauthored a book, Playing Before An Overflow Crowd: The Story of Indian Basketball in Robeson, North Carolina, and Adjoining Counties.*